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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: A TALE OF TWO ETHNIC MINORITY CITIES

REF: TBILISI 0770

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a. i. Kent D. Logsdon for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: City government officials and NGOs in the Samtskhe-Javakheti (S-J) cities of Akhaltsikhe and Akhalkalaki were upbeat about their future in Georgia, but worried about protecting their cultural and linguistic heritage. The majority of the estimated 300,000 ethnic Armenians in Georgia live in these two cities located in south central Georgia. The general consensus among various interlocutors and local staff, both this time and during our last visit to the region in March (reftel), was one of amazement at the speed with which infrastructure projects are moving forward. Road development is making travel easier and improving connections between the region and the rest of Georgia. Georgian language classes are more readily available and therefore better attended. Despite this, language remains the most significant obstacle in efforts to integrate the Armenian-speaking community of S-J. The ethnic Armenian community continues to call for the adoption of Armenian as a regional language, the resolution of church ownership issues, and more local autonomy. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Comment: Many of the main issues the region faces, including unemployment, are problems throughout Georgia and not exclusive to S-J. For example, many in the region called for more local autonomy, which mirrors similar calls from other regions in Georgia which seek more control over budgeting and administrative resources. Despite these concerns, the general atmosphere in S-J observed during this August 31 - September 3 trip was positive, and the standard of living appears to be improving visibly. End Comment.

MORE CONNECTED

¶3. (C) While the mountain scenery in S-J is spectacular, all eyes were on the smooth black asphalt covering the road that replaced the once infamously pothole-laden road from Akhaltsikhe to Akhalkalaki. The dilapidated roads were a main factor in the isolation of the region from the rest of Georgia. The Millennium Challenge Corporation's (MCC) road project in the area has transformed what was a six-hour drive from Akhalkalaki to Tbilisi to three and a half hours. Construction crews dotted the road, and a micro-economy including food stands and clothes washers has developed. Akhalkalaki city council chairman Nairi Iritsian was especially excited about the MCC project to extend the highway to the Turkish border, which he expects will vastly improve trade and economic investment. Iritsian opined that Akhalkalaki could be at the center of a trade corridor between Turkey and Armenia. Akhaltsikhe city council chairman Davit Atunashvili added that the government is connecting natural gas to buildings throughout the city, which should improve quality of life and encourage investment.

¶4. (C) Akhalkalaki Ombudsman representative Seda Melkumenian said that before the road improvements, the Armenian community felt isolated and ignored by the government, and as

such there was no incentive to learn Georgian. During this trip, however, many remarked on the increased attendance at Georgian language classes. Program Coordinator for the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies in Akhalkalaki Dali Agdgomeladze said that, in the past, people would not attend classes because there was a stigma associated with learning Georgian. As one of the few ethnic Georgians in the city, Agdgomeladze was often asked to give language classes in secret. Now many residents are openly taking advantage of the free language programs offered by international organizations and NGOs. At the office of the Akhalkalaki NGO Caucasus Institute, much like a grade school classroom, Georgian language learning tools were proudly displayed on the conference room walls where language classes take place. Agdgomeladze and her organization began a bilingual preschool program (Armenian-Georgian), which the local municipal office has expanded and funded. Iritsian noted that many graduates from a special minority outreach program at the Zurab Zhvania Institute in the University in Kutaisi -- who were given Georgian language and public administration training -- have gained employment. Veronica Ambari from the Armenian Association in Akhaltsikhe noted that the quality of the language programs has also improved.

15. (C) Iritsian pointed out that the biggest school in Akhalkalaki (in terms of number of students) remained the Russian language schools, followed by the Armenian language schools, and then lagging far behind were the Georgian language schools. He also noted that only ethnic Georgians attend the Georgian schools, as ethnic Armenians fear being called a "traitor" by the greater Armenian community. In Akhalkalaki, the city remains too small to support the job

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demands of the population. Many young people are unable to seek better prospects in Tbilisi because they lack the necessary Georgian language skills; as a result, the region is losing much of its young talent to Armenia and Russia. The founder of Meskhi Democrats of Akhaltsikhe said there were only three applications from the region for the national university entrance exam because of the lack of language skills.

#### HOW THE GOVERNMENT CAN BUILD TRUST

16. (C) Our interlocutors in S-J all emphasized three issues on which they hoped the government would take action. The first, and by far the one most emphasized, was the acceptance of Armenian as a regional language. De jure, only Georgian can be used by the local government and in schools; de facto Armenian and Russian are used. On September 3 Armenian president Sarkisian stated that Georgia should recognize Armenian as a regional language based on the principal of "integration without assimilation." The second issue was resolution of ownership questions concerning those churches claimed by both the Armenian Orthodox Church and the Georgian Orthodox Church. Agdgomeladze said that the issue is "like a volcano, you never know when it will erupt." The third issue was a call for more local autonomy. People complained of having to wait for officials to come from Tbilisi or having to travel to Tbilisi themselves, at great expense, in order to get simple administrative matters completed, such as obtaining passports or registering their property. Iritsian also complained that the Governor of the region still has not filled the one deputy governor seat, out of three, traditionally reserved for an ethnic Armenian.

LOGSDON